

VLADIMIR NABOKOV 1899-1977: A NOTE ON A
LATE ENTOMOLOGIST

"Look, how pretty," said observant Chateau.

A score of small butterflies, all of one kind, were settled on a damp patch of sand, their wings erect and closed, showing their pale undersides with dark dots and tiny orange-rimmed peacock spots along the hindwing margins; one of Pnin's shed rubbers disturbed some of them and, revealing the celestial hue of their upper surface, they fluttered around like blue snowflakes before settling again.

"Pity Vladimir Vladimirovich is not here," remarked Chateau. "He would have told us all about these enchanting insects."

"I have always had the impression that his entomology was merely a pose."

"Oh no," said Chateau.

(from Pnin by V. Nabokov, Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1957)

Not just Timofey Pavlich Pnin, the title character of his 1957 novel, but many "real" people thought that Vladimir Vladimirovich's—that is, Vladimir Nabokov's—entomology was an affectation, a little marginal coloration on the hindwings of his prolific writing and busy teaching careers. But it wasn't. "My passion for lepidopterological research, in the field, in the laboratory, in the library, is even more pleasurable than the study and practice of literature, which is saying a good deal." (Interview for Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature in 1966.)

Nabokov was born in old St. Petersburg in 1899. By the age of seven he was chasing butterflies across Russian meadows and marshes (see Chapter Six of *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited*, New York: Putnam, 1966). In a 1920 entomological article, written during his Western European émigré period, he described some species he observed in the Crimea. It was his first published writing in English, 20 years before he was forced to flee Europe and abandon his "docile" Russian and decided to tame English for his creative purposes. For seventy years, until he died in Montreux, Switzerland in 1977, Vladimir Nabokov pursued Lycaeides and Plebejinae, dissected and drew their genitals, described their haunts and once said, "I have often dreamt of a long and exciting career as an obscure curator of lepidoptera in a great museum." (Interview for Life Magazine in 1964.)

His published lepidoptera is not minor. From 1941 to 1948 he worked very hard and very happily over a microscope at the laboratory of the Museum of Comparative Zoology, Harvard. From 1941 to 1953, at the same time he was writing and teaching, he published some 10 major articles in entomological journals (see pp. 314-335 of *Strong Opinions*, New York:

McGraw-Hill, 1973). "I am the author or the revisor of a number of species and sub-species mainly in the New World . . . Several butterflies and one moth have been named for me . . . There is also a genus *Nabokovia* Hemming, in South America." (Interview for Bayerischer Rundfunk in 1971.) At one time he had begun work on an illustrated "Butterflies in Art," from Egyptian antiquity to the Renaissance.

The playful lepidopterological images that flutter across the pages of his stories and novels had a very precise purpose. They established contact between two of the great loves in his life, literature and lepidopterology, "between the precision of poetry and the excitement of pure science." (Interview for the BBC in 1962.)

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¹ The author, who is working on a bibliography of Nabokov, requests copies or reprints of the articles listed, or information on where they can be obtained.

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